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RUEHRA/AMEMBASSY RIGA 0156
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RUEHVL/AMEMBASSY VILNIUS 0141
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RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 1052
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 3074
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2460
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO BRUSSELS BE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BISHKEK 000998

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SUBJECT: KYRGYZSTAN: TEARS AT THE FOREIGN MINISTER'S IFTAR

REF: BISHKEK 924

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Classified By: Ambassador Tatiana C. Gfoeller, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Things got off to a tense start at the Dip Corps Iftar hosted September 29 by Foreign Minister Karabayev over Russian bullying on Georgia. Improbably, however, the evening then dissolved into a lachrymose fest of nostalgia for the Soviet Union. END SUMMARY.

TENSION AT TABLE NUMBER ONE

¶2. (C) Ambassador attended the September 29 Iftar for the Diplomatic Corps hosted by Foreign Minister Ednan Karabayev and was seated at Table Number One, along with Karabayev himself and the Ambassadors of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. Next to Karabayev, a seat was prominently empty: the one reserved for Russian Ambassador Valentin Vlasov. Karabayev was visibly annoyed over this no-show. Ambassador commented that she had seen Vlasov alive and well at a recent concert and speculated that he might have had to skip the Iftar because of preparations for the up-coming Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Summit in Bishkek. "That's no excuse," snapped Karabayev. "We're all busy with preparations for this."

¶2. (C) About an hour into the proceedings, however, Vlasov made a grand entrance. Smiles ensued all around, but Karabayev was still visibly miffed. He started in on Vlasov, fretting that Russia would use heavy-handed tactics to pressure the Kyrgyz Republic at the October 9-10 CIS Summit to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Karabayev taunted Vlasov that only Russia and Nicaragua had done so, so far: "And the only reason the Nicaraguans did it is because you forgave their debt. That's how you make friends these days: you buy them. Let's see who you'll buy

off next!" Vlasov took distinct umbrage and started in on what appears to be his hobby-horse: his seven months captivity as a hostage of Chechen Islamist rebels (which he had already detailed for the Ambassador during a previous meeting -- reftel). "For seven months I woke up every day not knowing if I would make it to the evening," he cried. "That makes me impatient with lies nowadays. The Georgians are as bad now as the Chechens were then. Terrorists! Killing innocent Ossetian women and children! Remember Beslan!"

YOUR REAL FRIENDS ARE NOT NICARAGUANS

13. (C) The atmosphere at Table Number One shifted subtly at the mention of the notorious Chechen attack that left 300 southern Russians, mostly children, dead. "That was a dark day for all of us, Russian and non-Russian alike," said Kazakh Ambassador Bakyt Ospanov. "It certainly was!" weighed in Asomuddin Saidov, the Tajik Ambassador. "Thank Allah that we defeated those terrorist monsters." Karabayev turned to Vlasov. "Listen to us!" he chided the Russian. "Your real friends are not Nicaraguans. We are your real friends!"

14. (C) The Kazakh agreed, stating that all of Central Asia was "one people" and that if one looked at things broadly, Central Asia and Russia were "one people" too. Turning misty-eyed, the Tajik began reminiscing about the Soviet days, when it was possible to journey to every corner of the Soviet Union and study at every university, without customs, borders, or visas. Vlasov sensed his cue: "And who broke that up?" he thundered. "Three guys in a forest!" (an obvious allusion to Presidents Yeltsin, Shushkevich, and

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Kravchuk, who dissolved the Soviet Union and proclaimed the CIS in the Belovezhe Forest in 1991.)

15. (C) The Tajik took up the lament. Gorbachev had destabilized the situation, he complained, allowing things to get so chaotic that three men could of their own volition destroy a country of many millions of people. The Kazakh agreed, mocking Gorbachev's and the reformers' supposed allegiance to democracy. "No one asked us, the people, if we wanted to break up," he accused. "We never got a chance to vote on this. What kind of democracy was this?" Vlasov aggravated his indictment, stating that given the millions of Soviet citizens who suffered displacement, extreme poverty, and even death as the result of the USSR's demise, those responsible for it were nothing but "criminals." A chorus of amens ensued.

PEOPLE ARE MORE IMPORTANT

16. (C) Karabayev, who had been listening quietly, suddenly jumped in. He said that as an academic, not a politician, he had studied the break-up of the USSR from a scholarly perspective and had been appalled at how it had happened. "Seven guys in the Baltics conspired to declare three states independent and got away with it," he criticized. He added ominously (but without giving any details) that already on the second day of the anti-Gorbachev putsch he had been informed of how each Soviet Republic leader felt about breaking up the Soviet Union. "One day I will write a scholarly book about this, and you will be surprised," he threatened. "Many reputations will lie in ruins as the result. But it is still too soon." The Russian Ambassador thanked his CIS colleagues for their brotherly feelings. Concluded the Foreign Minister: "Governments are governments, but people are people. And people are more important." By the end of the Iftar, the only dry eyes at Table Number One were the Ambassador's.

COMMENT

17. (C) It is unclear if the assembled CIS Ambassadors realized the extent of the Ambassador's understanding of Russian, which was their language of discourse. In the beginning, the Foreign Minister threw her occasional glances to see if she was following the conversation. But as the evening wore on and his emotions got the better of him, he ceased to bother doing even that. Karabayev is a respected academic and among the most pro-American Cabinet members. However, the strength of even his attachment to Mother Russia goes a long way to explain the ability of Russia to influence the Kyrgyz on a variety of fronts. His comments about Nicaragua were enlightening. It appears that the Kyrgyz don't always have to resist thuggish Russian pressure; sometimes they react like jealous lovers on their own.

GFOELLER